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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe some general methodological issues which should be considered in selecting evaluation techniques to determine the effectiveness of EXCEL, a program designed to improve educational process and outcomes in inner city high schools. Four methodological issues are examined: (1) the selection and development of an appropriate model; (2) the assessment of program inputs and outputs; (3) the determination of the time dimension in the evaluation of goals and objectives; and (4) the choice of evaluators to perform the evaluation. An examination of EXCEL's goals reveals that a change in the measures as stated in the program's objectives (i.e., to improve self esteem, to improve the learning environment, to improve school attendance, to decrease vandalism, and to improve achievement) cannot be fully attributed to the effect of the EXCEL program relative to other factors. Nevertheless, EXCEL is said to be a positive approach to the complex problems of urban education. (Author/GC)

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EVALUATING PROJECT EXCEL:

SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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EVALUATING PROJECT EXCEL:
SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Recently, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, President of Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity), has generated a great deal of enthusiasm and support for Project EXCEL -- a program designed to improve the process and outcomes of education in inner city high schools.[1] Although the federal government has allocated funds for the expansion of EXCEL, there is an increasing recognition of the need to evaluate the project's effectiveness in current and future program sites. Despite reports of the positive effects of EXCEL pilot programs in selected schools in Kansas City, Chicago and Los Angeles, some observers emphasize the need to address deeply embedded problems experienced by urban, inner city schools. For example, Robert Green has concluded that "there is no panacea to counteract the effects of poverty and race upon education and children. These crippling effects can be partially overcome by inspiration and pride, but this is not enough."[2] Faustine Jones has further indicated that permissiveness and attacks by neoconservative intellectuals have created a social climate in which the goal of excellence in education may be difficult to achieve. These attacks involve:

"... 1) the reopening of genetic inferiority theories,
2) the contention that the poor are responsible for their own condition,
3) the idea that governmental and institutional intervention in individual affairs makes no substantial difference, and
4) advocacy of a pseudo-meritocracy."[3]

Recognizing that EXCEL must be viewed in the context of the myriad problems besetting urban educators and policy makers, the National Institute of Education has solicited proposals to conduct a three year evaluation of EXCEL as a demonstration program. It has been acknowledged that "the major purpose of a demonstration program is ... to show the value of a new concept and ... encourage voluntary replications of the program in other cities".[4] While the initial evaluation of EXCEL will be limited to assessing its effectiveness as a new programmatic concept, it may be useful, nevertheless, to examine issues which have created problems in past evaluations of programs adopting a social intervention approach.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some general rather than technical methodological issues which should be considered in selecting evaluation techniques to determine the effectiveness of EXCEL. Four methodological issues will be examined:

1) the selection and development of an appropriate model;
2) the assessment of program inputs and outputs;
3) the determination of the time dimension in the evaluation of goals and objectives; and
4) the choice of evaluators to perform the evaluation.

It is hoped that this essay will stimulate the discussion of other evaluation problems and contribute to further analyses.

One of the first considerations involves the selection and development of an appropriate evaluation model. EXCEL, as an innovative demonstration project, is essentially non-experimental in nature; therefore, social science evaluators who operate at their best in experimental and quasi-experimental situations must employ non-experimental approaches

(i.e. survey methods, field studies, etc.) in ascertaining the effectiveness of EXCEL.[5] But since there is no consensus among evaluation experts as to the incorporation of non-experimental techniques in the evaluation of social action programs, the development of an appropriate model will be difficult. In this respect, the attempt to develop an evaluation design may be as much a demonstration project in need of evaluation as the EXCEL program itself. Consequently, it is critical that this be made clear from the outset since observers of the EXCEL movement, both supporters and skeptics, will eagerly await early evaluation returns to affirm their arguments for or against the continuation and expansion of EXCEL.

A second consideration involves the delineation and measurement of the impact of the program's "inputs" on its "outputs." Simply stated, the inputs include those elements which are fed into a program to make it work, and the outputs are the intended outcomes or the fulfillment of objectives and goals of a program; inputs are independent variables and outputs are dependent variables. While the EXCEL dependent variables are clearly discernible, the measurement of the independent variables may create some problems for the EXCEL evaluators in terms of a precise determination of the impact of specific inputs on specific outputs.

The expected outcomes, as stated in the objectives of EXCEL, are clear:

1) "to establish a committee composed of school/community persons to advise and plan school activities as well as assist in establishing policy and practices in target schools;
2) to improve students self-esteem;
3) to improve general learning environment of target schools;

4) to influence positively student occupational and social aspirations;

5) to improve school attendance and decrease school drop-out rate;

6) to decrease verbal and physical assaults among students and teachers;

7) to decrease school vandalism and related school crime; and

8) to improve academic achievement."[6]

On the other hand, the inputs have been stated in more general terms which makes operationalization difficult. EXCEL inputs have been defined in terms of the "... involvement from the 10 levels affecting education: the board, the superintendent, the staff administrators, the principals, the teachers, the parents, the pupils, the religious institutions, the mass media, and the broader community."[7] Although the role of some actors has been defined in more specific terms (e.g. parents pledging themselves to set aside study hours for their children and to become more involved in school affairs etc.), evaluators, in their attempt to explain and predict specific outcomes, must still sort out the dynamics and interrelationships between the various actors in the EXCEL program. For instance, how much input from the various actors is needed to achieve certain levels of success? Are certain actors more crucial than others (e.g. parental involvement vs clergy)? Can involvement of the various actors be sustained without other programmatic inputs such as financial resources, staffing and other personnel? Irrespective of the type of evaluation design decided upon, there will be a need to carefully draw upon the EXCEL pilot programs in order to obtain clearer measures of the EXCEL inputs. Initially,

it may prove useful to measure the effects of the less complex EXCEL project inputs such as the "Athletes for Excellence" and the "Career Role Models Program" before attempting to tackle more difficult problems such as assessing the impact of EXCEL on school board-parent-teacher interactions and the improvement of student academic achievement. It is imperative that the evaluators successfully resolve the issue of measurable inputs and outputs if the effectiveness of EXCEL is to be accurately assessed. It is a caveat of evalution research that when a program has no measurable inputs, no outputs or effects can be attributed to the program, at least in scientifically justifiable terms. In such instances, whatever outputs are observed, even if they are positive, can more easily be attributed to factors other than the program.

A third consideration of EXCEL which is likely to cause concern is the length of time necessary for the outcomes to be achieved. Do EXCEL developers expect to see results in one, two, three or four years or more? Can EXCEL be judged as a failure because its objectives are not achieved within a prescribed period of time? Does the time needed for EXCEL to succeed vary with the conditions present in a given school and community at the time the program is introduced? If so, what are these conditions and how can they be measured? Such questions will plague EXCEL implementers and evaluators and will become more intensified if EXCEL moves from the status of a demonstration program, with a limited number of sites, to a national program adopted by a large number of inner city school systems with varying histories of educational problems. One characteristic of federally supported social action programs is that, although addressed to long standing social ills, they are usually expected to achieve positive results in a relatively short period to time, or tney stand

the risk of losing substantial portions of their funding. Federal accountability should not be seen as the only issue, however, since EXCEL has received some support at local levels. In the past, the lack of instant results by major social intervention programs has served as ammunition for conservatives who argue that social action programs waste time and money.

A fourth aspect of EXCEL can be treated outside of the methodological realm, but it should be viewed as a closely related issue. It involves the choice of evaluators to undertake the evaluation. Should the evaluation of EXCEL be conducted by an evaluation team which knows the local systems in which EXCEL is operating, or should evaluators be more detached in an effort to achieve greater objectivity? This question has been an ongoing concern in the field of evaluation research, and it has been an especially sensitive one in the evaluation of broad aimed social action programs -- particularly when program activity and evaluation occur simultaneously with evaluation tasks being performed by program operators themselves. But even when evaluators are detached, it has been often argued that prior knowledge of the background of a local system (whether real or imagined) will bias the evaluators' interpretation of the findings. Therefore, an attempt to select evaluators on the basis of their level of knowledge about a local educational system cannot escape the fact that evaluators have values which may enter into the evaluation process. The problem is especially critical in the selection of EXCEL's evaluators since the charismatic leadership of the Reverend Jesse Jackson and the national exposure of EXCEL have elevated the program to the status of a social ideology where proponents tend to embrace its positive features while opponents

accentuate the negative factors.

Resolution of the four methodological considerations presented in this discussion will not be easily accomplished. If attempts to assess the effectiveness of past social action programs can serve as a guide, there is little reason to expect that the evaluation of EXCEL will proceed smoothly. Finally, EXCEL observers, including proponents, critics, policy makers and others, should carefully weigh evaluation results in making conclusive judgements relative to EXCEL's impact.

NOTES

1. Jesse Jackson, Push for Excellence The Developing Process of Implementation (Chicago, Illinois: Push for Excellence, Inc., 1978).

2. Robert L. Green, "Poverty, Race, and the Pursuit of Excellence," Phi Delta Kappan, November, 1978, p. 200S.

3. Faustine Jones, "The Current Social Climate and Its Effect on Excellence," Phi Delta Kappan, November, 1978, p. 217S.

4. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Proposal No. NIE-R-78-0026 Evaluation of Project EXCEL, 29 August, 1978, p. 8.

5. Ibid., p. 15.

6. Jackson, Push for Excellence, p.5.

7. Jesse Jackson, "In Pursuit of Equity, Ethics, and Excellence: The Challenge to Close the Gap," Phi Delta Kappan, November, 1978, p. 193S.